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SUBJECT: MILLS ADMINISTRATION RENEWS FOCUS ON DECENTRALIZATION

#### SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Recent statements by senior Ghanaian officials suggest a renewed focus on decentralization as the Mills Administration moves to implement its agenda. President Mills has designated the Minister for Local Government as point person for decentralization, which officials claim will enhance the powers of district and municipal assemblies, and foster local participation in governance and decision making. The GOG has promised transparency, nationwide consultations, improved competency, and a firm financial backing for local assemblies. Vice President Mahama has called for direct election of District Chief Executives, and stated that the Government would consider constitutional amendments to advance its policy. While the rhetoric indicates a serious approach to decentralization, it remains to be seen what concrete steps the government will take in an effort that could limit its hard-won presidential powers. End Summary.

#### NDC Platform Commits Party to Renewed Decentralization

¶2. (U) During the 2008 election campaign, Mills' National Democratic Congress (NDC) party promised to enhance decentralization, and revive policies the NDC promoted when it was last in government. While decentralization is referenced in Ghana's constitution, the country's system of government is in fact highly centralized, and there has been little incentive for the party in power to relinquish authority to regional or local institutions. Nevertheless, in its party manifesto, the NDC emphasized its commitment to decentralization and outlined steps the party would take to accelerate decentralization.

#### GOG Leaders Consider Constitutional Amendments

¶3. (SBU) On August 6, NDC General Secretary Johnson Asiedu Nketia (who also serves in the Cabinet) told POL Chief that district and municipal assemblies are weaker and less independent than a decade ago, and that the government is reviewing decentralization policy to halt excessive executive influence. He said that unqualified support staff have made District and Municipal Chief Executives autocratic and unaccountable. Nketia said President Mills has designated Minister for Local Government and Rural Development Joseph Yieleh Chireh as his point-person for decentralization. Nketia added that the NDC is considering constitutional amendments to make Parliament more independent and accountable.

¶4. (U) After taking office in March Joseph Yieleh Chireh, Minister for Local Government and Rural Development said that the government's goal is to make Metropolitan, Municipal and Districts Assemblies (MMDAs) autonomous of the central government, and to ensure "transparency in the use of resources for the benefit of the people." Chireh said that the Mills Administration is working to empower "officials to independently implement policies at the local levels and ensure speedy implementation of programs and projects."

¶5. (U) On August 7, Vice President John Mahama called for a review of decentralization policy, and said that District Chief Executives should be directly elected by the people (Note: Under the constitution, DCE's are appointed by the President. End Note). He noted that the government has begun to organize stakeholder

consultations nationwide to review the process. On August 15, the VP said that the government would hold a constitutional review conference in early 2010 to identify areas that require amendments.

#### Opposition Claims NDC Insincere re Decentralization

¶6. (SBU) On August 13, Nana Ohene Ntow, General Secretary of the opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP), told POL Chief that the party in power uses local government positions for two principal reasons: (1) to exert political influence at the local level and implement its political philosophy; and (2) to dispense government jobs to supporters. Ntow said that there was no genuine will among the political leadership of either of Ghana's two main parties to grant autonomy to district assemblies as it runs contrary to the ruling party's political interests. [Note: Ntow's skepticism is supported by a recent spate of violence in many communities, in which NDC activists have opposed the President's choices of technocrats as Municipal and District Chief Executives rather than party activists. Such instances indicate the challenge the GOG faces in managing the expectations of grassroots party members. End Note].

#### Comment:

¶7. (SBU) As noted by the NPP General Secretary, a major obstacle to decentralization is the fact that the ruling party (whether NPP or NDC) has used local government positions to distribute patronage and secure power. To allow direct election of District Chief Executives, as suggested by the Vice President, would lead to the handover of many key positions (in the NPP-dominated Ashanti region, for example) to the opposition. There are already indications that grassroots NDC activists are unhappy with the Government's policy. While we believe that President Mills and the NDC leadership is

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sincere in its desire to pursue decentralization, the road ahead will be challenging: Mills will have to overcome opposition within his own party from those who understand the threat this poses to their personal interests. End Comment.

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